

NBC NIGHTLY NEWS  
17 October 1984

MITCHELL: The charge that the president could've prevented last year's Beirut bombing came as he began rehearsing for Sunday's crucial foreign policy debate. The White House knows that Lebanon will be the toughest issue he faces. According to The Nation magazine, Mr. Reagan ignored CIA warnings of increased threats against the Marines, including one five days before the bombing. The charge from the author of the article: PATRICK SLOYAN (The Nation): They did have not just one report, but a number of reports that there was efforts (sic), there would be a terrorist attack against the Marines.

MITCHELL: The denial, from the national security adviser, saying the threats were general over a period of months. ROBERT MCFARLANE (national security adviser): But you never have, nor did we, in this case, a specific threat of a specific attack against a specific location or a time.

MITCHELL: Charge number two, that Defense Secretary Weinberger recommended on Oct. 18 that the Marines be withdrawn, five days before their barracks were blown up. SLOYAN: Before them, they had a recommendation from Mr. Weinberger, secretary of Defense, which was presented at the national security meeting of which (sic) the president chaired, and the recommendation was to withdraw the Marines from the airport.

MITCHELL: The denial: There was no recommendation on that day, direct, indirect, written or verbal. MCFARLANE: No, I'm confident that there was no such recommendation. And the implication here that there was division within the administration in which a recommendation wasn't followed is simply untrue.

MITCHELL: The magazine says McFarlane got Weinberger to back down during a break in the meeting so that the president would never have to rule on the recommendation. No one denies that Weinberger and the military command consistently opposed the Reagan policy of keeping the Marines at the Beirut airport once they had become military targets. At issue here is whether they recommended withdrawal at the Oct. 18 meeting, five days before the bombing. Weinberger won't discuss it. Secret documents from the meeting show that Secretary of State Shultz said, 'We should maintain our forces in Beirut and offshore.' But he concentrated on the need for closer military ties with Israel, something Weinberger opposed. The president was warned beforehand to 'expect objections from Cap'--that is, Weinberger--the CIA, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.' The charges in a liberal magazine do go over old ground. The problem for the president is that they've resurfaced three weeks before the election and four days before the foreign policy debate. Andrea Mitchell, NBC News, at the White House. <